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ABSTRACT

The Join Together National Policy Panel presents five policies that can help communities reduce and prevent substance abuse. They are: (1) compel substance abuse treatment for criminal offenders; (2) ensure that every person who has an addiction gets treatment; (3) make substance abuse prevention an urgent priority in every community; (4) increase taxes on alcohol and tobacco; and (5) provide media time for counter-advertisements portraying the health risks associated with alcohol that is equal to the time spent promoting alcohol. These policies will help every community develop a comprehensive strategy for reducing alcohol, illicit drugs, and tobacco use that is coordinated across institutions and among individual citizens. Ramifications of each policy are discussed. (SLD)

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Take Action—

on

5 Policies America Must Adopt to Reduce and Prevent Substance Abuse

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A REPORT FROM A JOIN TOGETHER NATIONAL POLICY PANEL

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Introduction

As the former Mayor of Houston, I have seen the damage that alcohol and drug abuse can cause to families, neighborhoods, and all of a community's institutions.

However, I also know that when the residents of a community are determined to confront substance abuse, and to involve public officials in this effort, it is possible to reduce and to prevent this problem. The key to this success lies in having national and local policies that support such community efforts.

With this in mind, Join Together recently convened a policy panel to help determine what the nation's policies should be to reduce substance abuse. I had the honor of chairing this latest panel, which brought together members of several previous Join Together panels.

We believe that these policies will make a difference. That's why I urge you to discuss them with your neighbors and members of your local substance abuse coalition, as well as with your local, state and national officials. Working together we can get these policies adopted. And the sooner we begin, the more impact we will have.

Mayors, city councilors, school committee members, state legislators, and other key office holders will respond if you present them with proposals for solving your community's drug problems. The earlier you involve them in the discussion, the more enthusiastic and supportive they will be. You don't even have to wait until candidates for office have been elected — talk to them now when they are running for the position. Ask them to support policies which will have a real impact in preventing and reducing substance abuse.

I want to thank my colleagues who joined me on this panel. We hope these recommendations lead you to take action now.

Sincerely,

Kathryn J. Whitmire
Panel Chair
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Take Action—

on Five Policies America Must Adopt To Reduce And Prevent Substance Abuse

Illicit drugs, alcohol and tobacco are tearing apart the fiber of our nation. Yet we can dramatically reduce their use and the harm they cause. Below are five policies that, if implemented, will make our lives, and those of our families and neighbors, healthier and safer.

The panel offers these policies as a call to action. Take them and make them work in your community. Join together with your neighbors, co-workers and local officials to create change. Every community can begin today to reduce substance abuse if you take steps to:

1. **Compel substance abuse treatment for criminal offenders.**
2. **Ensure that every person who has an addiction gets treatment.**
3. **Make substance abuse prevention an urgent priority in every community.**
4. **Increase taxes on alcohol and tobacco.**
5. **Provide media time for counter-advertisements portraying the health risks associated with alcohol that is equal to the time spent promoting alcohol.**

How do we know these policies will have an impact? We base them not merely on our own extensive, first-hand experiences, but also on three national surveys of community leaders conducted by Join Together during the last five years, and on the deliberations of four national policy panels that studied underage drinking, criminal justice issues, substance abuse treatment and prevention. Throughout our research, we have heard an echo of unanimity from community leaders supporting these five themes.

And we discovered something else even more important. We cannot wait for someone else to tackle the problem. There are success stories all across the nation: Communities have reduced drunk driving, closed down crack dens, and found jobs for troubled teens. And the members of these communities have found success — not by waiting for others to act, but by taking matters into their own hands.

Substance abuse is a national problem, but tackling it requires the work of every community and of every concerned citizen. **Each community must develop a comprehensive strategy for reducing alcohol, illicit drugs and tobacco use, coordinated across institutions and among individual citizens.** Everyone in the community, from all walks of life, must become involved, from parents to police, from ministers to magistrates, from teachers to tavern owners.

These policies will work — but only if you make them work. Share them with your neighbors. Urge your elected officials to support them. Develop a plan for putting them into effect and seeing them through to achieve success. You will change your community — and yourself — for the better.

DISCUSSION OF THE POLICIES

1 Compel substance abuse treatment for criminal offenders.

Treatment of substance abuse must be an integral part of the criminal justice system. Every substance abuser who passes through the system must be compelled to undergo programs of treatment and rehabilitation.

The criminal justice system can take substance abusers off the streets, but it cannot keep them off the streets. Under our current system of probation and parole, drug and alcohol abusers who commit crimes and serve their time will be let out of jail, usually to return to the very communities in which they were arrested. And when they return, many will still be users, because the system does very little to treat the addiction that often led them to commit the crime in the first place.

If we are to stop the revolving door of incarceration and release and incarceration once again, the criminal justice system must serve to break the

cycle of substance abuse, not merely to interrupt it. Its objective should be not simply to punish offenders, but also to use their arrest and incarceration in a way that maximizes the benefits that can be gained for the community. To achieve this, the system must recognize and respond to the fact that addiction is a chronic condition that jailing, alone, will not cure.

Science has come to understand that addiction is a disease of the brain that weakens the addict's self-control and rationality. Alcohol and drugs alter the user's brain chemistry in ways that can take years to reverse. In this sense, addiction is a chronic relapsing disease. Many people mistakenly believe that the enforced abstinence that results from incarceration will cure addiction. But this is simply not so. Even after a lengthy abstinence, the addict can still crave the pleasure of the drug, and the craving can become even more intense when the addict returns to the community, where there are many strong reminders of that earlier life. Besides, incarceration does not equal abstinence; it is a sad fact that prisons and jails are not drug-free.

But for that window of time that the criminal justice system has the offender in its grips, it has an unparalleled opportunity to do something about the addiction. The system should compel offenders who have substance abuse problems to undergo a program of treatment and rehabilitation. For offenders sentenced to prison, treatment should be made part of the sentence. For those on probation or parole, treatment should be a condition of release.

Treatment programs offer a high payoff in reducing crime. Consider:

- **A 1994 study conducted by the RAND Corporation[1] found that while law enforcement efforts to seize illicit drugs do little to reduce supply, treatment measurably cuts demand.**
- **A 1994 study by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs[2] (CALDATA) found that illegal activity in the state dropped by 43.3 percent after treatment; the longer participants remained in treatment, the greater the reduction in criminal activity.**
- **An Illinois study[3] which followed ex-offenders for two years after they participated in an in-jail treatment program found that they committed significantly less crime than other offenders.**

- **In Missouri,[4] graduates of a court-supervised treatment program had a 50 percent lower recidivism rate than a comparable population without treatment.**

Compelled treatment and rehabilitation should be in addition to, not in place of, other punishments. Further, treatment must be integrated into every step of the criminal justice system, not merely its prisons. Police officers, prosecutors, courts, correction officials and probation/parole authorities all must work together to push offenders into programs that will prevent them from returning to drugs and crime. We know that the greatest cost savings can be realized by providing substance abuse treatment for addicts within the criminal justice system. But when we carry this concept a step further, we can also save lives and money by providing treatment for other people with addictions in our own communities.

2 Ensure that every person who has an addiction gets treatment.

Treatment is the most cost-effective method to reduce drug abuse and related crime; for this reason, we must ensure that every substance abuser receives treatment.

Treatment of substance abuse saves us all money. It cuts tax expenditures, reduces health care and law enforcement costs, and enhances workplace productivity. According to the RAND study mentioned earlier, every dollar spent on treatment saves more than $7 in crime-related spending and lost workplace productivity. This makes treatment the most cost-effective means of reducing substance abuse. It is important to also understand that the savings in societal costs and reduced crime benefit not only the addict, but also the people who live in the community. And a recent Harvard University report[5] said that these savings occur even if the person undergoing treatment experiences relapse, as most will on several occasions. The report said that even temporary periods of reduced substance abuse benefit society. This point is crucial and means that we must redefine our measures of success to include even short periods of abstinence.

Although treatment saves money and improves the quality of life for all of us, only a small percentage of substance abusers receive it today. There are an

estimated 23 million people who require treatment for drug problems, alcohol abuse or both. But in 1991, only 4 percent of these people were enrolled in treatment programs. Some primary reasons for this gap include:

Inadequate private health coverage Most private-sector health insurance policies and managed-care plans either do not cover, or do not adequately cover, substance abuse treatment. In fact, the recent growth of managed-care threatens to cut private-sector substance abuse programs substantially.

Lack of intervention Our policy must be to get substance abusers into treatment, not just wait to treat those who ask for it. Critical to this is that medical care providers be trained and required to take an affirmative role in intervention and referral. Other community organizations, as well, should create mechanisms for early assessment and intervention.

Public-sector decline There has been a decline in public spending for substance abuse treatment during a time when the need for such programs has grown.

The obvious remedy is that third-party coverage for substance abuse must be the same as that for other treatable diseases, like diabetes, cancer and heart conditions. The added cost of this coverage will more than be offset by increased productivity and reduced overall costs of health care and criminal justice. As we discuss in recommendation 4, taxes on alcohol and tobacco should be increased, with revenues earmarked for the financing of treatment and prevention programs.

3 Make prevention of substance abuse an urgent priority in every community.

All young people are at risk of becoming substance abusers. Therefore, we must enact an urgent agenda of prevention including strengthened enforcement of underage alcohol, illicit drugs and tobacco laws; targeting of higher-risk youth; and comprehensive substance abuse education.

We find ourselves at a critical juncture. At a time when our population of young people is growing significantly, our commitment to prevention of substance abuse is declining. Efforts at prevention made great strides in the 1980s, particularly in the schools, where programs sought to educate young people

about the dangers of drugs. But over the last few years, these efforts have lost momentum. Many schools are doing less about substance abuse now than they did ten years ago. Resources have not kept up with need.

As a new generation of young people faces the pressures to use drugs, drink alcohol and smoke, it faces the possibility of never hearing the message of prevention. We must begin immediately to enhance existing programs and develop more effective tactics for the long run. In particular, our strategy should include these elements:

Law enforcement We must be firm on underage drinking and alcohol use. We must step up enforcement of laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol and tobacco to minors. Stores that break these laws and sell to minors should have their licenses revoked. Adults who sell or serve alcohol to minors should face criminal penalties. Every jurisdiction should enact laws making it illegal for adolescents to drive after drinking. A recent Join Together survey shows that 97 percent of community coalition leaders support such laws. Legal loopholes preventing or relaxing enforcement of these laws must be closed.

Targeting While we should never forget that all kids are at risk, we should nevertheless make special efforts to target higher-risk populations with enhanced prevention techniques. Prevention efforts should be, in effect, customized to meet the specific needs of particular groups of young people. These efforts should take into account all environmental factors, including schools, peers, community and family. And, to the extent feasible, they should take into account individual risk factors; if a parent is arrested for drug possession, for example, the child should be given special counseling.

Education We must develop comprehensive programs to educate young people about drug and alcohol use. These programs must not be left only to the schools; they must be integrated throughout the community. Religious and athletic organizations, the media, families, businesses, police and other community organizations all must play a role in prevention. Further, steps must be taken to ensure the effectiveness of these programs. They should rely not on slogans, but instead on teaching young people the true nature of addiction. They should incorporate current knowledge of effective prevention techniques, such as role playing. Most importantly, prevention programs should strive to involve young people as partners in the prevention and policy-making process.

Beyond policy, prevention must become a way of life. Most importantly, adults must see themselves as role models and begin to practice what they preach. If we do not want our children to drink and drive or use illegal drugs, then we should not do so ourselves.

4 Increase taxes on alcohol and tobacco.

Governments should significantly increase taxes on the sale and use of alcohol and tobacco products, with revenues earmarked for substance abuse treatment and prevention.

There is now a wealth of data demonstrating that increases in federal, state and local taxes on alcoholic beverages and tobacco reduce their consumption and related injuries and deaths, particularly among adolescents. And higher taxes on alcohol and tobacco have the support of 95 percent of community coalition leaders, a Join Together survey shows.

For example, a 1994 Surgeon General report, "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People," concluded that price increases at the state and national levels significantly reduced cigarette smoking among youth and adults. And in California, an increase in the tobacco excise tax resulted in a sharp decline in smoking, according to a study conducted by the State Department of Health Services. In addition, a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services predicted that increases in alcoholic beverage prices would lead to substantial reductions both in the frequency of youth alcohol consumption and in heavy drinking among the young. Meanwhile, the National Bureau of Economic Research in a 1993 report found that increased beer taxes could have resulted in a 54 percent reduction in the number of teens killed in motor vehicles between 1975 and 1981.[6]

Revenues from these taxes on alcohol and tobacco should be earmarked to help fund treatment and prevention programs, thus helping to offset some of the costs imposed on society as a result of the use of these products.

5 Provide media time for counter-advertisements portraying the health risks associated with alcohol that is equal to the time spent promoting alcohol.

Broadcasters who air alcohol advertising should be required to provide equal air time for advertisements portraying the negative effects of drinking. Other media should voluntarily provide equal space for such counter-advertising.

Ninety-eight percent of community anti-drug program leaders tell us that they want alcohol advertising restricted, according to Join Together's latest survey of community coalitions. The alcohol industry spends over $2 billion a year promoting its products. One brewer alone spends more each year promoting its beer than the entire budget of the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse. Advertising glamorizes drinking, associating it with success, sophistication, athletic ability and sex.

Among those most influenced by alcohol advertising are adolescents. Ninety percent of high school seniors have consumed alcohol, 30 percent within two weeks of being polled, a recent national survey revealed. A Massachusetts survey[7] found that, of teens aged 16-19, 20 percent typically consumed five or more drinks at a sitting. Teen drinking has immediate and horrible consequences. Every year in the U.S., at least 6,000 young people die and countless others are injured in events linked directly to alcohol — including traffic crashes, homicides, suicides, drownings and fires.[8] Drinking is also a factor in unprotected sex that results in teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection. In the longer term, teens who drink are more likely to progress to drug abuse and chronic alcoholism continuing into adulthood.

Although advertising is not solely to blame for teen drinking, it offers constant reinforcement of the notion that drinking equals the good life. And, while print and broadcast media are brimming with alcohol advertising, they offer almost nothing showing the negative effects of alcohol.

In order to level the playing field and give young people a fair shot at avoiding alcohol use, there should be equal time for counter-advertisements. Any TV, radio and cable operator who runs advertisements promoting alcohol should be required to provide equal time for advertisements about the health risks of alcohol use. Print and other media should voluntarily provide equal space for such counter-advertisements.

A CALL FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

The policies above can form the core of a local action plan. But every community is unique; each should thoroughly assess its own particular needs and identify action steps, policies and strategies appropriate to meeting those needs. In undertaking this assessment, community leaders should call together as diverse a gathering of community representatives as possible. They should perform at least these steps:

- **Assess the harms substance abuse is causing the community.**
- **Determine what is already being done and what else needs to be done.**
- **Identify the community groups that are already involved and those that should be involved.**
- **Develop a plan allowing the various groups to collaborate in reaching the community's goals.**

The plan, of course, is only a beginning. It must be put into effect and carried through to the end. To ensure that this happens, each community should designate a local office to facilitate implementation of the plan and to coordinate related community efforts to fight substance abuse. The office should also be given responsibility for assessing the progress and success of community efforts, measured against benchmarks set by the community as a whole.

It cannot be emphasized enough that local efforts to reduce substance abuse must truly be community efforts. Join Together's surveys identified more than 30 types of agencies, organizations and citizens that need to be involved in efforts to prevent and reduce substance abuse. Yet the bulk of the work is being left to schools, law-enforcement officials and prevention service agencies. Among those falling far too short in their involvement are religious organizations, private businesses, local governments, the media, private human and health services agencies, courts and civic organizations. Get them involved. Everyone can play a role.

The time to act is now, before you or someone you love becomes the next victim. The place to act is right where you are, in your home, your schools, your church, your community. It is up to you and your neighbors to put these policies into action. These are the building blocks, but only you can make something happen. Do it now, before it is too late.

Footnotes

1 RAND Corporation, Drug Policy Research Center. *Controlling Cocaine: Supply Versus Demand Programs*, 1994.

2 State of California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs and the National Opinion Research Center. *Evaluating Recovery Services: The California Drug and Alcohol Treatment Assessment* (CALDATA), April 1994, p. 33.

3 Swartz, James A., Lurigio, Arthur J. and Slomka, Scott A. *The Impact of IMPACT: An Assessment of the Effectiveness of the Cook County Jails Substance Abuse Treatment Program*. Chicago, IL, 1994.

4 Join Together. *Fixing A Failing System; National Policy Recommendations: How the Criminal Justice System Should Work With Communities to Reduce Substance Abuse*. Feb. 1996.

5 *Toward More Sensible Drug Control Policies: Priorities For A National Working Group*. Harvard University, The MIND/BRAIN/BEHAVIOR Intertaculty Initiative, Drugs and Addiction Working Group, May 1996.

6 Chaloupka, Frank J. "Effects of Price on Alcohol-Related Problems." *Alcohol Health and Research World*, Vol. 17, No. 3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993.

7 Hingson, R., Strunin, L. and Berlin, B. *Five Years After Surgeon General Koop Called for Adolescent AIDS Education: Have Teen Beliefs and Behaviors Changed?* A Massachusetts Study, 1993.

8 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Alcohol and State Programs. U.S. Department of Transportation. "Youth Fatal Crash and Alcohol Facts." 1993.

Action Steps

1. Use this report as a reason to schedule a meeting with every current elected and appointed official in your community, as well as with candidates running for local offices. Tell them what you would like them to do to reduce substance abuse. Leave a copy of the report with them.

2. Circulate this report to others in your community concerned about substance abuse.

3. Use this report to reach out to new groups, such as fraternal and civic organizations, schools, businesses, physicians, law enforcement agents, district attorneys and others, and work toward common goals.

4. Convene a town meeting to discuss the issues raised in this report. Ask participants what they want done about substance abuse in your community. Ask your local cable companies to broadcast the meeting so residents who were unable to attend can still benefit from the content.

5. Schedule editorial board meetings with your local newspaper. Brief them on how substance abuse is affecting your community. Make recommendations for change.

6. Meet with junior high and high school students. Ask them what they think should be done to reduce and prevent alcohol, illicit drug and tobacco use among youth.

7. Connect with Join Together Online. (http://www.jointogether.org)

Join Together is the nation's leading resource bringing together people, ideas and technology to help communities fight excessive alcohol, illicit drugs and tobacco.

For additional copies of this report contact Join Together at (617) 437-1500.

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